

# B H A V A I

## Gujarati Folk Drama

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### Introduction

In all spheres of Indian life there is an undercurrent of spirituality. Religion and culture are indefinably intertwined in Hindu way of life. As components of culture, most of our traditional and folk art forms have their origins in Religion. Whether they are performing arts like dance, music and drama or plastic arts like sculpture and painting they have something in common. Invariably their origins can be traced to religion and spirituality and the content of most of these art forms was always divine. While the former group of arts were practiced and utilised to propitiate the Gods, the latter were used to adorn and decorate the abodes of Gods. In her treatise on classical dance, Kapila Vatsyayan made the following observation. "The Hindu mind views the creative process as a means of suggesting or recreating a vision, however fleeting, of a divine truth, and regards art as a means of experiencing a state of bliss akin to the absolute state of *ananda* or *Jivanmukti* (release in life). For the traditional artist, regardless of the field in which he worked, artistic creation was the supreme means of realising the universal being. Art was a discipline (*Sadhana*), a *Yoga* and a sacrifice (*Yajna*)."

The concept of art in Indian way of life is a means to an end. The intentions and the purpose were always divine. It is a vehicle to take the artist nearer to God. Some of these art forms acquired over the years secular and social overtones in their content and intentions, retaining the structural characteristics of the original. One such artform is 'Bhavai', the folk drama of Gujarat.

### Bhavai—the Artform

Most of our Classical art forms have parallel folk forms which are spontaneous expressions of people. These do not have rigid frame work. One such form is folk theatre. Each region in our country has its own

distinct tradition handed down by earlier generations. Prominent among them are Nautanki (Uttar Pradesh), Lalit, Tamasha (Maharashtra), Maach (Madhya Pradesh), Swang (Punjab), Veedhi Natakam (Andhra Pradesh), Teru Koothu (Tamil Nadu) and Bhavai (Gujarat).

Bhavai in Gujarat denotes a form of entertainment characterised by narration, lyrics, farce and drama.

Bhavai, according to Dr. Sudha Desai (a scholar of Traditional art forms) and Shri Uma Shankar Joshi (Chairman, Kendra Sahitya Akademi) originated as a ritual to propitiate *Shakti* (Devi) and later must have developed into a folk form. Dr. Sudha Desai in her thesis presented evidences in support of her theory. Poet Asait, who lived in 14th century, is believed to be the father of this tradition. Asait, who belonged to Siddhpur in North Gujarat, is believed to have composed 360 Bhavai *vesh*. Most of the earlier and contemporary Bhavai artistes belong to the same region. Nayaks and Bhojaks of Targala community in the initial stages took up Bhavai as a religious ritual but later adopted it as a profession.

Bhavai performances are usually held on days sacred to the female deities (Shakti) such as Ambaji and Becharaji like Navratri festival. Till recently, Bhavai was quite a flourishing tradition and even now in rural areas of Gujarat it is popular.

It is a simple but very interesting and expressive form of folk play which encompasses religious, historical, mythological and social events. It employs music, dance, romance and farce to present a coherent human experience.

Bhavai, which was once a religious ritual, gradually transformed into people's art drawing inspiration from the emotional lives of rural folk. This transformation gave Bhavai its vitality, variety in content and wider appeal.

#### **Content and form of Bhavai**

Performance of Bhavai combines narration, lyrics and drama. It presents several independent incidents woven together in a pattern. Each of these acts has its own plot and atmosphere. Each act is known as a 'Vesh'. (Vesh : costume—here the part stands for the whole). Duration of a Vesh and the number of characters in it vary. Each performance consists of several such 'Vesh'. But there is no fixed number of Vesh to a performance. It largely depends on the repertoire of the troupe and the preference of the audiences.

Each Vesh has its own dramaturgy and includes elements like music, dance, recitation, humour and mimicry. Themes are thin and simple. But they are made attractive and presentable by including narrations, tricks

and jokes. All the "Rasas" are depicted but humour and satire dominate. Social comment is all pervasive and powerful.

Bhavai is generally performed in the court-yards of temples or village squares. The performance starts in the evening and continues till midnight.

Most of the acts used to be anecdotes from Epics and Mythology. Among the mythological themes, Ram-Lakshman, Mahadev, Sankar-Parvathi, Kan-Gopi are well known. Over the years Bhavai acquired several other themes into its repertoire. Jasma-Odan, Sadhra-Jesang, Ratna-Hamir are partly historical and partly legendary. There are others which reflect the Muslim rule over the Gujarat region, like Paithan-Bhamini, Zenda-Jhulhan, Chel Batav-Lal Batav. Some of these acts depict the socio-political conditions of those times. Some others deal with common experiences and characters one comes across in rural life. These depict various aspects of the society like customs, beliefs and superstitions. Social evils are depicted in these acts through imitation and mimicry. Typical among them are *Bania* (Merchant), *Kansaro* (Tinker), *Sarania* (Knife Sharpner), *Darji* (Tailor) and *Maniaro* (Bangle Seller). Such acts provide the audience a peep into the lives of craftsmen and artisans and often give a chance to get a laugh. Some of the acts like 'Achhooth' and 'Kajodo' are tirades against the prevalent social evils. They are presented satirically and the practices are ridiculed. For instance in 'Achhooth', the barbaric practice of untouchability is criticised. 'Kajodo' depicts the ridiculous practice of marriage between couples with wide age differences and denounces it. The ingenuity of Bhavai lies in the way the message is conveyed without sermonising.

Bhavai used to be mainly an oral tradition. Only some of the compositions are recorded. Players used to modify the language to suit the audiences of different places and times. The not so rigid structure of Bhavai allows it to be flexible to improvise and imbibe contemporaneity. Thus, Bhavai with its spontaneity and contemporaneity endeared itself to the masses.

Bhavai is performed with very little paraphernalia. It doesn't need a stage. Curtains and other stage properties are also not required, because most of the change-overs are brought about through narration and suggestion. A few musical instruments and some colourful costumes are the only requirements for a successful Bhavai performance.

Generally Bhavai performances follow a pattern. Before the commencement of the performance the leader of the party (Nayak) draws a circular line on the ground with castor oil which demarcates the arena or stage from the audiences. This ritual is known as Chachar-Antharvu which is supposed to keep off the evil spirits. Spectators sit around the circle. A torch is lit and kept ablaze on one side (this continues to be there till the end). The torch symbolises the Devi (Jawlamukhi). Nayak applies vermilion to the torch and

the torch bearer. Flower petals are sprinkled on the instruments, artistes and audience and the Nayak formally announces the commencement.

Bhungals, Pakhawaj and Cymbals (musical instruments) are sounded in a particular tune which signifies the commencement. *Gavaiyyas* render *Devi Stuti* and then go on to sing *Maru ni. Sakhi*, a folk-lore song.

Then the Nayak invokes *Ganapati* and announces the entry of *Ganesha*. He enters hiding his face with a brass plate marked with *Trishul* and dancing to the accompaniment of music. Entry and propitiation of *Ganesha* is to ensure smooth proceedings.

Next comes '*Kalika*' in a ferocious looking costume. *Devi* blesses the admirers and promoters of Bhavai and curses those who denigrate it.

The third entrance is of a Brahmin. This is farcical and a caricature. Some of the characteristics and mannerisms of Brahmins are ridiculed in a light hearted way.

The above said preliminaries are observed by most of the Bhavai troupes. Then onwards the entries of different Vesh's take place one by one. Each character in a vesh is introduced by 'Avanu', which is significant dramatically. The introductory remarks of Nayak, the pitch of the musical notes, the pace of dance with which the character enters, create a mood and instantaneously establishes the character and its traits. Usually in theatre it takes several incidents and dialogues to establish a character but Bhavai achieves it in a couple of moments.

The *Gavaiyas* (Singers) and instrumentalists provide music all through the performance. They provide background music as well as chorus.

In addition to the humour provided by the characters themselves, Ranglo-Rangli (male and female characters) keep the audience engaged throughout the performance especially during interludes between two vesh with their wise cracks, horse play and social comment.

### **Music and Dance in Bhavai**

Music and dance are extensively used in Bhavai. They in fact complement and enhance the dramatic effects of Bhavai.

Well known ragas and talas of North Indian music are used in Bhavai. But they are adapted and executed in a way which is typical to Bhavai.

Bhungal, Pakhawaj, Paro, Vansali and cymbals are the essential instruments used in Bhavai performances. Bhungal is a pair of wind instruments,

which are 4 feet long horns. They are known as Nara and Mada. They give out a shrill drone with one or two variations. The former is high pitched while the later has a low pitch. Sounding of Bhungals heralds the commencement of Bhavai performance. Pakhawaj is a percussion instrument. Paro and Vansali are wind instruments similar to flute. The former is made of metal, while the later is made of Bamboo. Cymbals are metallic instruments which produce resonant sound to keep time.

These instruments, apart from providing interludes, accompany the *Gavaiyas*. Some troupes use Ravan hatho (a crude type of violin) and harmonium also.

Dance plays a vital role in Bhavai. Each act in Bhavai commences and closes with dance. Dance connects the incidents and helps to change over.

The dance employed in Bhavai cannot be considered as belonging to any particular school. Dr. Sudha Desai opined that it is similar to Kathak. Dance in Bhavai serves a theatrical purpose and is not employed for its own sake. The dance exhibits and helps establish the personality of a character. That is why Dr. Sudha Desai termed it as "Pravritti Natya."

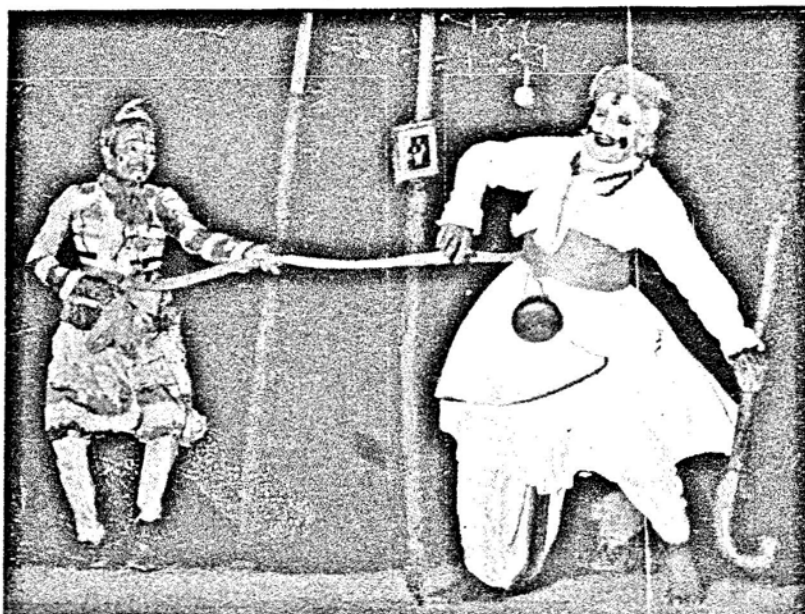
Bhavai though considered as a form of entertainment to rural folk, was and continues to be relevant socially in more than one way. While picking up themes from contemporary life, Bhavai attempts to mirror the social life at a micro level. It reflects contemporary literary, social and political events. The earlier artistes used to borrow from the contemporary literary works. Compositions of Kabir, Meera, Tulsidas and many other poets have been used by Bhavai performers. They used to serve a useful purpose. At a time when there were no mass media and literature was not accessible to the masses these performers used to bring the philosophy and wisdom in the literature to the masses in a language and manner which is comprehensible.

Bhavai performers used to chastise the audiences by depicting certain social practices and exposing their irrationality. They also denounced social evils by focussing on the undesirable consequences. By judicious use of sarcasm and satire they used to taunt the people; to think about it. This tradition still continues. Apparently these broad-sides at social evils and superstitions are considered as entertainment but in reality they provide an opportunity for the people to introspect. Humour and satire are used to convey a subtle message of reform without sounding pedantic or didactic.

Between their wise cracks *Ranglo*, *Rangli* venture to comment on society. This social comment is also made in a manner that reaches the audience invariably.



Scenes from Bhavai





Scenes from Bhavai





In spite of the onslaught of different entertainment media, Bhavai is still popular in rural Gujarat because of its contemporaneity and vitality. For rural people Bhavai is a live, pulsating experience which they find very much credible. Precisely this is the reason why Mass Media Planners are trying to adopt Bhavai format for their social campaigns. Shri Uma Shanker Joshi (Chairman, Kendra Sahitya Akademi) said "the contemporary dramatist has much to adapt and adopt from the Bhavai technique." These words sum up the relevance of Bhavai to the present society.

### **Social Comment in other forms**

Comparing Bhavai with other forms in its entirety is beyond the scope of this paper. So, a modest attempt is made to collate some other forms which use social comment like Bhavai.

In Andhra Pradesh it appears there used to be two forms which extensively used social comment and satire. "Bahu Rupam" used to sarcastically comment according to Prof. S.V. Joga Rao (Natya Kala Feb. '70). 'Valakam', a fore runner to street theatre, an impromptu performance, used satire to expose hypocrisy in rural life and to taunt the audiences. (Rambhatia Krishna Murthy, Natya Kala, Feb. '70). These two forms are not in vogue now. Burrakatha, yet another form, origins of which can be traced to Saivism and Yakshagana is still popular in Andhra Pradesh. Structurally this is different from Bhavai, but uses social comment extensively with an intention to reform.

According to Kapila Vatsyayan social satire and sharp comment are woven into the dialogue of 'Swang' of Punjab while 'Tamasha' of Maharashtra uses it through its characters.

### **The Future**

The future of Bhavai lies in the hands of contemporary theatre artistes. Concerted efforts can only save Bhavai from degeneration and extinction. Attempts are being made by some cultural institutions to revive the art form. Notable among them are the efforts that are being made by Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, Ahmedabad, which has started a 'nucleus' to teach youngsters the art of Bhavai. It is also trying to persuade the Masters of Bhavai to participate in this endeavour. Academy is also trying to stage Bhavai performances with contemporary themes. Other such institutions may emulate and take up the good work to refurbish the tradition of Bhavai and ensure its perpetuity.